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Oh mother, mother,
When will you come ?
The crow is tired with a-cawing.

But conditions improved with time; we grew older and less imaginative, and above all the tide of Burmese nationalist feeling which surged into being in about 1920 was at last beginning to seep through the convent walls.

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Even the nuns heard, in 1930, about Saya San who raised a rebellion in Tharawaddy district, and roused such fervour among a certain section of the population that about 2,000 rebel followers were killed—their bodies vulnerable to gunfire in spite of the charms they had tattooed on—before the Government succeeded in suppressing the rebellion. Although Saya San was a charlatan to those in authority, and his followers a band of unruly dacoits, his conviction that he was born to become the monarch of a newly resurrected Burmese kingdom fired the imagination of some nationalists. To them he was an intrepid spirit, his courage so keen and his body so hardy: *Kya ko Khalok, thitngok hnin hsu ko thinbyu :* The tiger his stubbing stone, tree stumps and bushes of thorns his smoothest mat. By the time the nuns had heard of Saya San I had another Burmese girl as a fellow boarder and class-mate. Grace Nee was a girl of great spirit and mental liveliness. Her father was also an a-so-ya min, and we derived great comfort and happiness from each other's presence. When the class-teacher scolded one of us, saying, "You Burmans nowadays are expecting us to kow-tow to you. Yes, this mad fellow Saya San. And you think that we must bow to you," then the other would bang desk and chair in sympathy and indignation. Our hearts would swell to bursting point, for though we knew little yet about nationalism or patriotism, we identified our country and our race with the persons of our parents, and we could hardly bear this constant humiliation of their name. We shrank from telling them about it, however. My father never knew how different our life at school was from the world at home, and my mother will learn of it for the first time when she reads this.

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What a glorious new world opened out before us when we went to the University. What splendour there was in the richness of Burmese dress, food, companions, religious celebration, music, dancing and wit. I only regret that I could not take full advantage of these years because family troubles tumbled around my ears just then, and when they had subsided I was forced into earnest study to win the best degree possible in order to comfort my mother. This was necessary because up till this time I had always disappointed my parents because I had preferred popularity among companions to concentration on studies. Rangoon

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AFTER a stay of three years in England, I set out on a return journey home with a band of friends and compatriots. This was in August 1940, and the long sea voyage round the Cape gave us time for all the thoughts which filled our minds at the prospect of seeing Burma again after three and four years abroad. Besides our excitement at the approach of family reunions and the delights of once again eating Burmese food, we wondered whether the events in the outside world during the past few years, and the outbreak of the European war, had filled our people with interest, excitement or alarm for international events. 175

Before I left Burma I had been a student among companions who had only a passing interest in affairs outside Burma, so filled had our minds been with separation from India in 1936, the general elections for the first House of Representatives in Burma's history, the formation of the first Ministry under Dr. Ba Maw, student strikes for the amendment of the University Act, and the fervid chastising campaigns on the part of monks and fanatic students for the wearing of thick homespun by women instead of the scandalously transparent imported muslins. The older people at home also turned their eyes along the same channels. Of Hitler and Mussolini our aunts had heard, as of caricatured figures on a distant screen, and Ba Maw's admiration of Hitler's position of power was obscured by his eccentric passion for gorgeous attire, which was much more in the public eye. 175 668

The letters which I received from friends in Burma during my three years in England had also been too full of the Indian-Burman riots which raged violently in 1938, the industrial strikes in the oilfields, and the repeated school and university strikes which added to the general domestic unrest of those years, to tell me much else. But since then we had read of the opening of the Burma Road as an event of world interest; later we had read with feelings of surprise, amusement and expectancy of the face-slapping, debagging and stuffing of passports into the mouth to which the Japanese had subjected Englishmen in the ports of China, as something new and startling in our time; and later still, the closing of the Burma Road at the insistence of the Japanese Government made us suddenly connect the European politics which so excited our English friends with the events in places which surrounded Burma, though not 175 578 563

175 yet with Burma itself. Brought up as a complacent child of a government
• 578 officer in Burma, this was the first time that I realized how we had un-
563 consciously thought of England, the British Empire, as a permanent world force during our lifetime—a force with which we might bargain advantageously or without success, but one that our fathers and we had taken for granted for all the time that we could remember. But now we realized it as one power—leading perhaps—amongst other powers in the West, and we realized also the existence of Japan and remembered how the Burmans who visited it always brought back stories of the beauty, progress and good manners of the country.

We left our English friends in the first half of August 1940, as they waited, braced for an invasion, to go to what they and we considered a war-free country. I was in the Ladies Room of a big restaurant in London just before I left, when the attendant who watched me wrap my longyi asked me which country I came from. "Burma," I told her. "Burma," she repeated uncertainly. "Is there a war there, Miss?" "No," I said laughing, "but there is a Road there." Yet I was only amusing myself. As we set out home, the furthest that our thoughts of war and Burma ranged, was to wonder whether the Burma Road and the recent closing of it had made people think more about Japan and China than they had done in 1937, when the outbreak of war between the two countries had caused little excitement except that some of my friends became consistent boycotters of Japanese goods. We also wondered vaguely whether trade had been affected, and whether thought and general social conditions had been stimulated with the world-shattering event of a European war, not dreaming that this was but the splash of a pebble compared to the tempest that was to follow.

197. Since I had left Burma, my mother and brother and sisters had settled
36 themselves in Rangoon and I wondered how the city would seem after
633 the big cities of the West. Rangoon is not one of the ancient cities of
772 Burma. Its present position in the life of the country and people is a complete turnabout from its traditional place, for in days gone by it had attracted the inhabitants through spiritual rather than material renown. While Pagan, Ava, Toungoo and Mandalay rose and fell in political and commercial importance, Rangoon—Dagon as it was called—continued unchangingly a seat of pilgrimage, connected with fable and divinity, forming an actual link with another world cycle that existed in the universe before this present arrangement of Mount Myinmo, with its surrounding heavenly, earthly and hellish regions, was formed.

632 For it was on the hill called Theinguttara, which now casts its shadow
773 on the city of Rangoon with its crown of the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, that the omens for the spiritual life of this world cycle were manifested, before

21: Htin Aung E-5 (ca. 1930) 1937 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

scenes. Still later, the scenes came to be taken from one story only, so that a whole story was given by the pageant. Dresses became quite gorgeous and the scheme elaborate. The pageant now needed organization. Therefore, the village came to be divided into two parts, eastern and western quarters or northern and southern quarters (the village was usually greater in length than breadth, being built along a main road). In larger villages and towns, the division was into four quarters. Each quarter was responsible for the production of a pageant. There was intense rivalry between the quarters to produce the finest pageant; it was usually friendly, but often enmity arose, and many pageants were occasions for free fights. The rivalry further developed the pageant, for new ideas would be introduced by one quarter to outrival the others. Soon the pageant became a play, its scenes coming to life.

The *Nibhatkhin* was the Burmese equivalent of the English miracle and mystery plays. It was the pageant come to life. With the pageant, the religious processions went along the main streets without stopping, each cart representing a set scene. But with the *Nibhatkhin*, each cart stopped at certain places. The most common of such places were the market-place, the house of the chief administrative officer, and the pagoda where the procession ended. At each of those places, each cart stopped, and the scene came to life. Dialogue and action were used. Therefore, people at the stopping places saw what was in effect a play.

The *Nibhatkhin* was extremely popular, and it lived on until recently, just as many of the English miracle plays continued to be produced right through the Elizabethan period. I saw one in the out-of-the-way town of Pauk as recently as 1916. However, I do not think that *Nibhatkhins* are produced anywhere nowadays. Sometimes one sees a procession on cars and motor lorries as a sort of reminiscence of the *Nibhatkhin*. But such processions are mere shows and lack the essential features of the Burmese miracle plays.

It was for the entertainment of the populace that the *Nibhatkhin* came into being, and as the Burmese entertainment connotes laughter, soon the element of humour came into the *Nibhatkhin*. At first none of the characters was made humorous, for they all came out of religious stories. And so the clown was introduced. The clown or *Lu-byet* ('the non-serious man') was put into the *Nibhatkhin* as an extra character, an attendant on the prince-hero. He was extremely popular, and soon another clown, an attendant on the princess-heroine,